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Security Council

Seventy-first year

Provisional

7780th meeting
Thursday, 29 September 2016, 11 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Van Bohemen	(New Zealand)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Gimolieca
	China	Mr. Zhang Dianbin
	Egypt	Mr. Kandeel
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Malaysia	Mr. Ibrahim
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Senegal	Mr. Seck
	Spain	Mr. Oyarzun Marchesi
	Ukraine	Mr. Yelchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America	Ms. Power
	Uruguay	Mr. Bermúdez
	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	Mr. Suárez Moreno

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015) (S/2016/796)

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The meeting was called to order at 11.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015) (S/2016/796)

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

Mr. O'Brien is joining us via video-teleconference from Geneva.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2016/796, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015).

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: Where shall I start? It is with raw grief, dismay, intense sadness, frustration and an unquenchable anger at the excess of sheer and unbridled horror — way beyond even the apex of horror of a fortnight ago — that I report today to the Security Council on the ultimate humanitarian shame that is Syria today, and in east Aleppo in particular. The people of Syria — and most immediately, the people of east Aleppo — are being subjected to deprivation, disease and death in increasing numbers and with increasing ferocity. This is not an unforeseen result of forces beyond our control. This is due to the action of parties to the conflict and it is the direct result of the inaction — be it through unwillingness or inability — of the international community, including most notably those members represented in this Chamber.

It is now a legitimate question to ask whether there is any level of disaster and death that can be visited upon the Syrian people that might prompt the parties to this conflict, and by extension the international community, to identify a red line that will not be crossed. This is not a distant conflict in which we as a community have only a passing stake; this is a critical test of the capacity and willingness of those in this Chamber to make a decision, take action to manifestly uphold the words of the Charter of the United Nations, to which all nations are bound, and to save the Syrian people from the scourge of war.

The past seven days have seen an intensification of attacks across the country. From air strikes in Deir ez-Zor to airstrikes and ground attacks in Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Idlib and rural Damascus and other governorates, fighting has intensified despite a one-week lull when the cessation of hostilities was reinstated, albeit with violations on all sides.

Nowhere has the fighting been more intense in recent days than in east Aleppo. Following the announcement by the Syrian Ministry of Defence of an offensive on 22 September, estimates are that some 320 civilians were killed and 765 injured in the first days. Over 100 children have been killed. These are not simply numbers to be added to a tally; these are individual and family lives that we have collectively failed to save. The alleged use of new bunker-busting bombs has reportedly caused mass destruction in an area that has already been decimated. I have received reports that there are bodies of babies, children, women and men stuck unrecovered in the rubble of the basements, up to 20 metres underground, where they had taken refuge and where they had been safe until the use of these new and recently introduced weapons claimed their lives. Air strikes are reported to have hit three of the four civil defense centres in east Aleppo, injuring staff and severely limiting their capacity to respond.

On 22 September, attacks rendered the Bab Al-Nayrab water-pumping station inoperable, stopping water delivery to most of east Aleppo. On 24 September, multiple air strikes struck the Jisr Al-Haj area in eastern Aleppo city, reportedly damaging warehouses belonging to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and killing one of the few remaining doctors in east Aleppo, as well as his wife — a senior midwife. Just yesterday, two of the eight remaining hospitals — including two of the four surgical units left in east Aleppo — were attacked and rendered out of service. I echo the words of the Secretary-General, who briefed the Council yesterday:

> "[T]hose using ever-more destructive weapons know exactly what they are doing. They know they are committing war crimes." (*S/PV.7779, p. 2*)

And let it be said that the evidence is being collected and the eyewitnesses accounts recorded. Even if not today, one day there will be no hiding place for the individuals and institutions callously, cynically perpetrating these war crimes. That is as much our United Nations responsibility on behalf of all the world's Member States, as it is the United Nations duty to preserve that evidence to point the finger at any one or more Member States and their leaders and officers come the day. The only remaining deterrent it seems is that there will be real accountability in the court of world opinion and disgust. Goodness knows, nothing else seems to be working to stop this deliberate, gratuitous carnage of lives lost and smashed.

Let me be clear — east Aleppo this minute is not at the edge of the precipice; it is well into its terrible descent into the pitiless and merciless abyss of a humanitarian catastrophe unlike any we have witnessed in Syria, with no access by the United Nations since 7 July, and the health sector in east Aleppo is now reportedly on the very verge of total collapse. Hundreds of critical medical evacuations are urgently required. I have received alarming reports of patients being turned away or treated on the floors of the few remaining health facilities. What little intensive care unit capacity there was has now been completely overwhelmed. Four people — three of them children — who did not have access to ventilators died as a result. There are also reports of severe shortages of surgical items, blood bags, anaesthetics and other critical medical items. As a result, the priority for assistance is as acute for medical items as it is for food.

Because of the state of siege, food remains scarce, with rations sufficient to feed only 40,000 for one month. Despite the presence of limited food stocks, the impact of limited food access is already being felt. Deaths have been reported from malnutrition, disease and poisoning by those scavenging for food. Fresh water is also now also in short supply, and waterborne illnesses and preventable killer diseases are expected imminently to rise dramatically — which is as unnecessary as it is tragic.

There are more than 100,000 children trapped in east Aleppo, and it is they who are among the most vulnerable, who suffer first and who suffer the greatest. The images of Alan Kurdi, Omran Daqneesh and now Rawan Alowsh might have captured fleeting global attention and be seared into our consciences, but they are neither isolated nor exceptional cases, but emblematic of the horrific murder and abuse of children by the parties to this conflict. Rescue teams are finding children every day under piles of rubble amid the inferno and choking dust of east Aleppo. Meanwhile, indiscriminate attacks are also being launched by non-State armed groups into western Aleppo, so of course this is not just one-sided, but the overwhelming weight of forces is against the people pinned down in east Aleppo. We must end this nightmare.

We have been ready and we remain ready to deliver assistance to eastern Aleppo through cross-border and cross-line support. Despite the distraction, as it sadly turned out, in the attempt to get a full cessation of hostilities — which crowded out negotiations for a shorter humanitarian pause — since July I have been calling for a minimum 48-hour weekly humanitarian pause must be urgently implemented to allow humanitarian aid to enter, to let medical evacuations take those in critical condition out, and to provide civilians respite from the barrage of bombs and attacks causing untold suffering.

Now is not the time for political grandstanding or protection of one's political or, indeed, military position. Now is the time to recognize the horror unfolding before our eyes, agree upon our common humanity and restore the cessation of hostilities to protect civilians and save lives. That would be the best of humanitarian action; if we cannot get a cessation of hostilities, we must at the minimum have a weekly 48-hour pause. Anything less would leave the Council today on the wrong side of history and on the wrong side of avoidable deaths. That is the responsibility of the parties to the conflict, but it is the united will of each and every member of the Council that will unlock the chance to make it happen.

As Council members have heard me say before, there are few words left to describe the horrors for people living under siege. Theirs is a daily struggle for survival as they remain trapped and beyond our reach, subjected to collective punishment. This revolting situation in Aleppo must be the SOS, the mayday call, to the international community. That the situation now meets the criteria for besiegement — including militarily encirclement, lack of humanitarian access and lack of freedom of movement for civilians — is clear. East Aleppo is now besieged.

Let me assure the Council that this is based not on conjecture, but on the facts on the ground that I have just reported. The area is militarily encircled by Syrian forces. In addition, armed opposition groups continue to conduct military operations from within the city, placing those trapped there at greater and continued danger. Despite all our collective efforts, which have been discussed in great detail in the Council, there has been virtually no humanitarian access through cross-border or cross-line actors since early July. It should be noted that this is a result of constraints by both the Syrian authorities and non-State armed groups.

Furthermore, despite the assertion of there being corridors available, civilians wishing to travel in and out of eastern Aleppo are unable to do so in any significant numbers. Members would do the same: one just does not do it if they have nowhere to go voluntarily and if the sniper is likely to take the shot anyway. As we have long said, civilians cannot move when there are such levels of insecurity. We have also assessed this lack of movement based on the military presence at entry and exit points and specific security concerns, not just about sniper fire and detainment when travelling through humanitarian corridors that were established by the Russian Federation.

The status of another 275,000 people besieged in Syria is truly unconscionable. We all must do everything possible to bring this medieval practice to an end for once and for all. That means that the number of people besieged in Syria has increased from 586,200 to 861,200, after deducting those who were required to leave Darayya as of late August. That is in addition to the millions of Syrians in hard-to-reach locations today.

Besiegement is not a weapon of war, it is a flagrant, unjustifiable breach of the law — law to which the besieging parties have signed up to. As the Syrian people struggle for survival and a political solution remains out of reach, the best that communities under attack can immediately hope for is that humanitarian assistance can reach them. The role of humanitarians is not to be part of a political solution, but to provide food, shelter and the tools of survival to those in need, while that solution is sought. Those efforts to protect the vulnerable, to deliver to communities in need and to step in to fill the gap where no alternative exists were dealt a cruel blow last week.

After half a decade of conflict, it should not be necessary to explain to any party that the laws of war afford protection to humanitarian aid workers. In 2016, I should not have to brief the Security Council on violence committed against those who are aligned with no side in the conflict and who are willing to enter the most challenging environments imaginable to help those suffering beyond imagination. Yet last week, while leaders from around the world met to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Syria, we suffered a devastating attack on a humanitarian convoy.

In the early evening of 19 September, as 31 trucks delivered lifesaving assistance just kilometers west of Aleppo city in Oram Al-Kubra, humanitarians came under attack in yet another shocking example of the disregard parties have for civilian life and humanitarian space. Over the course of two hours, the area around a clearly marked United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy became a killing zone. Eighteen humanitarians — 12 volunteers, five drivers and Omar Barakat, head of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in Oram Al-Kubra — were brutally killed. Another 15 drivers were wounded, many civilians were killed and injured and the warehouse where the supplies were being unloaded and a nearby medical clinic were both severely damaged. The local population has been further traumatized by witnessing what happens to those who try to help them. And of course, they did not receive the desperately needed lifesaving help — a double jeopardy defined.

I have expressed my deepest condolences to the families, colleagues and loved ones of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, and I pledge to do my utmost to ensure that their deaths were not in vain. I call on all of us to take hold of this moment. I call on the Council to urgently act to protect humanitarian actors, be they United Nations staff or our non-governmental organization partners, who face violent responses almost daily. I also call on the Council to push against all blockages and delays that are hindering the deployment of assistance, and to ensure the rapid, safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid to all those in need. Most important, I call on the Council to end the bloodshed.

The humanitarian convoy to Oram Al-Kubra was a meticulously organized movement, as are all deployments of humanitarian aid. When crossing a conflict line to deliver assistance, the United Nations and its partners first receive authorization by the Syrian authorities. Advanced notification is given to all sides, and ongoing updates of the convoy's location and status

are provided throughout its movement. United Nations humanitarian aid convoys inform all actors on the ground of the humanitarian delivery being undertaken. Such de-confliction is done to ensure that the delivery is safe from attack.

We do not yet have all the details. However, it is not too early to make clear the consequences of this shameful attack. If the attackers knew of the humanitarian convoy and intentionally directed an attack against it, they committed a war crime. Regardless of the reason and regardless of the party responsible, those people must know that they will be held to account. Accountability is important for the sake of justice, but it is also necessary to end the culture of impunity. That is as much a matter of practicality as it is of principle. If there are no guarantees that humanitarian convoys will be safe, the ability of humanitarians to deliver assistance will be jeopardized and those in need will continue to suffer. As I have said before, those on the front lines delivering aid are brave, but they are not suicidal. Sufficient security guarantees for the delivery of aid must be in place. Yes, that means engaging with all parties impartially, even to the distaste of some. Those are the humanitarian principles in which I and others in the United Nations and beyond involved in humanitarian action rely to give us our license to operate. For us access is everything. Without it, as we go far and wide across Syria, we cannot make the difference that the world's citizens call on us to make.

The Secretary-General has called for a vigorous investigation to ascertain the facts of the incident and for accountability for those responsible. The Secretary-General is currently reviewing options for the most effective format of the investigation. I call on all parties to stand up, demonstrate their desire to protect humanitarian space and support the investigation process, for full, transparent accountability and to banish impunity.

While it is true that the United Nations and its partners support millions of people with assistance each month through regular programming and cross-border activities, those who are in the most acute need are often those who cannot be reached through either modality. While we focus much of the attention on ensuring humanitarian access via cross-line convoys, this is not to take away from other modalities, which do most of the actual aid delivery, but to ensure attention is focused on the locations we cannot otherwise reach.

In both hard-to-reach and besieged locations, we have continued to reach communities in need through inter-agency cross-line convoys in September. On 19 September, we reached 84,000 people in Talbiseh; on 22 September, we reached 35,000 people in Moadamiya; on 24 September, we reached 70,000 people in Al-Waer in Homs; and the following day we reached some 60,000 people in the four towns — Madaya, Zabadani, Fo'ah and Kefraya. And we continue to reach people through the air — both by airdrops and air-bridges. We have now completed 126 air drops since April to Deir ez-Zour, dispatching food, nutrition, health, water and sanitation and hygiene supplies to people in need. That includes two full rounds of food distribution, each reaching a total of 110,000 people in need. A third round began on 12 August. We have now completed 90 airlifts to Qamishly, providing a combination of food, health, water, sanitation and hygiene supplies, nutrition, education, shelter and non-food-item assistance, including over 50,000 full food rations.

As for the people along the berm at the Syrian-Jordanian border, which I visited earlier this month, we have received positive indications from the Jordanian authorities that humanitarian organizations might be able to resume aid operations to reach those stranded there by early next month. We look forward to all the security and other arrangements being put into place so that can happen, until longer-term solutions are found. I am grateful to those who are working to hard to achieve that.

While we welcome these deliveries, which provide a lifeline to people largely trapped beyond our reach, the last weeks have been especially frustrating to see pass without access improving, particularly since the reinstatement of the cessation of hostilities should have provided an opportunity to extend our reach. Instead, the delays in cross-line deployments are becoming commonplace. The first inter-agency cross-line convoy in September deployed on 19 September. The first cross-line convoy last month only deployed on 23 August. That means that no aid reached many of those most in need through inter-agency cross-line convoys for the first three weeks each of the last two months.

The delivery of assistance to the four towns, the first after the five months since aid was last admitted on 30 April, occurred only after numerous hurdles and delays caused by the last minute removal of medical items, which required an additional set of negotiations of the parties to reach a final agreement. Beyond the

four towns, medical supplies have continued to be removed from humanitarian convoys, with more than 200,000 items having been removed this year alone. And linking humanitarian assistance of any kind to the tit for tat provisions of the Four Towns Agreement remains unconscionable.

As I have said many times, the United Nations has been and continues to be ready to deploy. Our requests are submitted and trucks are ready to move, but they have been delayed by the same bureaucratic tactics — late responses, lack of facilitation letters, negotiations over the number of beneficiaries. While such problems are being faced with alarming regularity, this month also brought further delaying tactics to deny aid to those in desperate need, such as the slow clearance by Syrian security forces in the warehouses and, in the case of Moadamiya, the damaging of items by security forces. Trucks had to be reloaded in the presence of Russian officers to ensure the cooperation of Syrian security personnel. Just yesterday, a convoy intended for Douma, despite having received all necessary guarantees and approvals, was denied access at the last Government checkpoint. After waiting over eight hours at the last Syrian checkpoint, it was forced to return to the warehouse.

Of course, insecurity has also continued to be a significant factor in limiting deployment. Just two days ago, on 27 September, a convoy to ar-Rastan was cancelled by the United Nations, when the trucks were at the last checkpoint of Syrian armed forces, due to air strikes over the town that the United Nations and its partners were attempting to reach. This is yet another convoy where all sides were informed of the movement, and all sides provided assurances of security, but failed to deliver safe passage. Surely you can imagine the hell for civilians, who woke up that morning hoping to finally receive life-saving aid but finding themselves instead under relentless attack.

We are now awaiting the response of the Government to the October inter-agency convoy plan, submitted on 19 September. The United Nations has requested to reach 962,800 people in 29 besieged, hard-to-reach and priority cross-line areas. A response is expected in the next day, and I call on the Syrian authorities to respond positively and on time to the request and to see the request response implemented in a timely manner. We cannot allow another month to go by where we wait three weeks before the first cross-line convoy. As insecurity increases, civilian suffering does as well. Sustained and safe access must be granted, based on the United Nations assessment of need.

Syria is bleeding. Its citizens are dying. We all hear their cry for help. As humanitarians, we are doing all we can. Last week, world leaders came to New York, sat around this table and met in ministerial level meetings, all with no tangible results. Instead, while the world leaders were meeting, violence actually increased — more civilians and more humanitarians were killed. It is time to place blame. It is time that the Council stops tolerating the utter disregard for the most basic provisions of international humanitarian law.

I call on the Council to act now, to do right by those who have sacrificed their lives and to take whatever steps are necessary to end the violence. The alternative simply does not bear considering. The depravity we see will only get worse. If the parties to the conflict will not, then the world's only hope is the collective, united will and measures of the Security Council. It is up to the Council to turn the tide, to create the conditions for aid to reach all in need, to end the sieges, to restore political dialogue and to bring an end to the war.

The President: I thank Mr. O'Brien for his very sobering briefing.

I shall now give the floor to the member of the Council who wishes to make a statement.

Mr. Bermúdez (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien for his detailed briefing. My delegation has requested the floor because we believe that such briefings are not solely for the Security Council but for all of the Members of the Organization. In that regard, as an elected member of the Council, we believe that it is our duty to share with the Members that elected us to this position our opinions on the theme of the open briefings. In order to ensure greater transparency in our work, I shall now share the view of my delegation. We would also like to be consistent with our actions on Monday, when we took the floor as the political dimension of the conflict was being addressed with Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura (see S/PV.7777).

I take this opportunity to thank you, Sir, for having convened on 21 September the high-level meeting of the Council (S/PV.7774) at which Heads of State, Heads of Government and Ministers spoke in favour of finding a negotiated solution to the crisis. Over the past week, we have borne witness to an abhorrent attack

on a humanitarian aid convoy, in violation of the most basic rules of international humanitarian law. In the past few hours, the city of Aleppo — or rather, what is left of Aleppo — has been devastated by one of the most intense air strikes since the start of the conflict, causing hundreds of deaths and enormous damage to infrastructure that was already practically in ruins.

This military escalation is another blow to the protection of civilians and to the expectations of the Syrian population to stop the protracted suffering that has lasted for more than five years. As we did yesterday during the briefing on the implementation of resolution 2286 (2016) (see S/PV.7779), we again vigorously condemn the continued air strikes on hospitals and medical facilities in Syria, which have recently become a repeated criminal practice and must stop immediately. We condemn the use of besiegement and hunger as a war tactic and appeal to the perpetrators of such acts to lift the sieges affecting millions of people in Syria. We continue to support the 48-hour weekly humanitarian pauses that could be the precursor to another ceasefire.

Nine months into the year, seven months since the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015) and seven months since the adoption of resolution 2268 (2016), and after almost 50 Security Council meetings on the situation in Syria, the situation appears to be worsening day by day. The statements we make here, however good our intentions, do not change the reality on the ground. Aleppo and other areas in Syria continue to witness the daily horror of ceaseless bombings that are gradually exterminating its population. It is carnage without any justification whatsoever in the eyes of a world that appears incapable of responding to so much barbarism.

Given the situation, a few days ago we asked what the Security Council will do and what the results of our deliberations will be in the light of a horror seldom seen in recent times. In spite of the fact that all of us present here having stated ad nauseam that there can be no military solution in Syria, events on the ground prove otherwise. Therefore, until the parties to the conflict in Syria and those supporting them cease their attempts to reach their objectives in that manner, it will be very difficult for us to reach an agreement that would enable the parties to resume negotiations to find a political solution to the conflict.

This is a defining moment. Thus far, the Syrian people and the international community have witnessed the failure of the Council to stop the hostilities, ensure sustained, regular and safe access for humanitarian aid, and create the necessary conditions to resume the process of political transition established in resolution 2254 (2015), which has been stalled for five months. It is our responsibility to fulfil the duties of the Council or go down in history as those to blame for being incapable of stopping one of the worst conflicts that humankind has seen this decade.

I plead for us to pursue every effort to set aside our differences and achieve once and for all a commitment to finding a new and perhaps final impulse to the search for a political solution for Syria. In that regard, we again urge the Russian Federation and the United States of America to continue talks in order to arrive at the agreements necessary to finally end the conflict and ensure the gradual restoration of peace in Syria. The Council can count on the support of Uruguay.

It is likely that if the Council were to consider Syria in terms of giving priority to the men, women and children, civilians and workers, who make up the vast majority of the population of that country, it would arrive at a more viable solution. The hundreds of thousands of victims and millions of Syrians who have seen their lives affected by the war will bear witness to our future decisions.

The President: I thank the representative of Uruguay for his statement, which reflects the views of the New Zealand delegation and, I am sure, those of many others in the Chamber.

As this is the last scheduled meeting of the Council for the month of September, I would like to express the sincere appreciation of the delegation of New Zealand to the members of the Council, especially my colleagues the Permanent Representatives, their respective staffs and the Secretariat for all the support that they have given to us.

Today's meeting takes on special poignance for me and my team. It will probably be another two decades before a New Zealander presides over the Security Council.

It has been a very busy month. We have reached decisions on several important issues, notably with regard to Colombia, aviation security, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and Afghanistan. But as today's briefing has underlined, we have not been able to reach decisions on the most pressing issue facing us. That is a matter of deep disappointment to

my delegation. Nonetheless, we recognize the very hard work, support and positive contributions of all delegations and representatives of the Secretariat, as well as all conference service officers and interpreters.

As we end our presidency, I know I speak on behalf of the Council in wishing the delegation of the Russian Federation our best wishes for the month of October.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.